

January 1, 2012

Holy Name Day St. Christopher's Episcopal Church

The late Irving Bunim would tell a story about a *brit milah* that he attended. When the rabbi asked the father for the name of the boy, the father responded: "Avraham, Yitzchok, Yakov, David, Shlomo, Yosef." The rabbi was astounded and asked the father: "why such a string of names?" The father replied: "Rabbi, I am a poor man so the child won't have much of an inheritance. If he looks like my side of the family, he is not going to be too handsome. If he resembles my wife's side of the family he probably won't be that smart either. So, I decided, let him at least have a good name!"

from <http://www.torah.org/learning/rabbiwein/5765/shemos.html#>

Who are **you**? What is the history of **your** name? Were you named after a family member? Friend?, Historical figure? Was your name chosen because it sounded good to your parents? Did you change your name yourself as you came of age?

Names are significant and powerful. The creation story of Genesis 2 has God offering all the creatures to Adam to name—

So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field...

All given names with their own unique and wonderful characteristics. Ancients believed that to know the name of someone meant to have power over them. In Genesis 32, we hear the story of Jacob wrestling with an unknown person all night:

When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him.

Today's lesson from Luke completes the infancy narratives we will hear this Christmas season. The birth of a child that has split all of creation, and sanctified time and space is upon us. Eight days later, Mary and Joseph take the child and have him circumcised and named. He is presented with a moniker that will carry him the rest of his life. Named by the angel, he will henceforth be Jesus—Yeshua—Joshua, the one who saves. Knowing one's name can provide blessing or curse; freedom or slavery.

Jesus. Such a simple name. But Hebrew Scriptures offer more. Isaiah 9 prophesies:

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

--a prophesy that was picked up gloriously by George Friedrich Handel.

In understanding that there is power in a name, we realize that all names must have some power. Modern American names that cause heads to turn include Vanderbilt, Rockefeller, Kennedy, Bush. Yet, so does Deborah, Mary, John, Richard, Charles. Some of these names have power because we can and have reached out and touched the people behind them—or they us. Mary isn't just the mother of Jesus. She is also our third grade teacher—the one who taught us the concept of multiplication. Charles wasn't just some ancient king with funny hair. He was the one on the playground who stood up for us, even if he did have a funny name, and glasses.

Our New Testament reading from Philippians adds:

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth...

What's in Jesus' name that is so moving, so substantial that thousands and millions would turn their heads and bow their knees. Perhaps it is more than the name. Perhaps it has to do with what the name stands for. Perhaps it is the power—the power Jesus gave to others—that causes such reverence.

If Jesus' name is so special, so dynamic, so transformative, then we, his collective disciples must also be. Christian—it's a name that seems common. Perhaps it's too familiar, too close. We find **Christian** on billboards and page after page in the phone book. The question remains how do we see ourselves as unique, amazing, and transformational? How do we radiantly glimmer in a world full of tinsel?

More than the name, it is the legacy we have. We make the name **Christian** special, unique and reverential by the way we honor it. Christian is worthy of praise because of others who have worn it, in the past or right now. It is striking because we hold it high

I invite us to look again at today's Psalm. It is truly one of my favorites. Listen again, this time in a translation by David Schutz

O Lord, our Lord, in all the earth
your glorious name is ever praised.
Even on lips of infant babes
your song is raised.

When I look at the sun and moon,
the stars and all in heav'n above,
how is it that we humans know
your saving love?

How can it be that you should care
for us poor creatures of the dust?
Yet you have made us like yourself
and honoured us.

Over all creatures great and small
you let us share your power to reign.
O Lord, our Lord, in all the earth
we praise your name.

'Words (c) David Schütz'

How is it that we humans know our Lord's saving love? How can we manifest that to the deeply hurting and troubled world? First we have the witness of Jesus himself guiding us onward. And we

have the witness and the power of being sent in his name. We have grafted his name into our hearts forever. We have proclaimed his mercy and grace as fundamental to our lives. We have adopted ourselves into his family.

Today, New Year's Day, is our pledging anew of our courage, stamina and will to do those things we find important in our lives—eating healthier, not smoking, drinking less, exercising. Today is also a day to offer ourselves once more to God: offer ourselves once more to follow the one who this day is dedicated to us. Offer ourselves to be Christ's hands and hearts in this world. We can start anew. We can re-dedicate ourselves to Christ.

"Lord Jesus, you have called me by name, and I am yours. Help me to draw near to your presence and to be receptive to your voice. Free me from indifference and complacency that I may do your will eagerly and whole-heartedly."

Amen.